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ABSTRACT

The role of the state government in higher education assessment is clearly expanding as both the state's interest and investment in higher education grows. Currently, patterns of state involvement vary widely--from indirect incentive programs to direct legislation or regulatory action. Institutional assessment and the resulting reform must be designed and carried out by the faculty and administration of that institution; however, assessment must be required, stimulated, and rewarded by the state. As a result, patterns of institutional assessment will vary. Nonetheless, there should be significant formative as well as summative elements. Funding of research on assessment is also recommended. Whatever the pattern of state assessment, it must preserve and enhance the richness and variety of American higher education. (GDC)

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The Why, What, and Who of Assessment: The State Perspective

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The Why, What, and Who of Assessment: The State Perspective

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As Gregory Anrig noted in his invitation to this conference, "The assessment of learning in college has emerged as an institutional, state, and national issue. It has been given particular urgency by legislatures in several states requiring evidence of student progress and of the standards being met on individual campuses." There thus seems to be abroad in the land significant support for Chaucer's maxim, "For that he naught assaieth, naught achieveth." I will seek, therefore, to address three questions: What has been the traditional role of the state in assessment in higher education? What appears to be the emerging role of the state? And what ought that role to be? Or, in Chaucer's terms and suggestive of the conclusion I will reach, "How ought the state to assaieth what it hopes its institutions of higher education will achieveth."

The Traditional Role of the State. As pointed out in the working document prepared for the ECS Commission on Effective State Action to Improve Undergraduate Education Agenda and Working Outline, 1986, of which I was a member, while the condition of undergraduate education is the subject of national concern, this concern is not without precedent. Undergraduate education was first subjected to national reexamination before the Civil War. The spotlight turned again toward higher education after World War II with the reports of the Truman Commission, the Carnegie Commission, and the ACE National Commission on Higher Education, all of which called for reforms in undergraduate education. However, it is important to note that these earlier reports, mindful of the strong American tradition of autonomy, were addressed primarily to institutions of higher education. They were not for the most part addressed to the states, to legislatures, or to state-level governing or coordinating boards—of which, indeed, there were few in what many would now undoubtedly view as "the good old days."

The Emerging Role of the State. Following an avalanche in the early '80s of national reports on elementary-secondary education, higher education moved into the limelight with a series of reports dealing, again and in particular, with undergraduate education. Central among these have been the NIE report "Involvement in Learning: Realizing the Potential of American Higher Education," the AAC report "Integrity in the College Curriculum: A Report to the Academic Community," the NEH report "To Reclaim a Legacy," and the ECS report "Transforming the State Role in Undergraduate Education." An unchanging part of the national report landscape is the fact that there was not before the Civil War and is not now a consensus on what improvements should be made. However, there is consensus on the importance of educational excellence at all levels for the cultural and social well being of all citizens. A latter day addition is the relationship seen between economic development and educational excellence. In fact, economic development is to education in the '80s what Sputnik was to education in the '50s.

While most of the reports that are stimulating current activity are national in their source (e.g., the National Institute of Education, the Association of American Colleges, the National Endowment for the Humanities), it is clear that at least one of the leading actors has changed—the call to action is increasingly directed toward the states. It is argued forcefully that this direction is appropriate as policy leadership, at least in terms of funding, shifts from the federal government to the states in a number of areas including education.

Peter Ewell in his paper on "Levers for Change: The Role of State Government in Improving the Quality of Postsecondary Education" (1985), raises the question of why state government should get involved. His response is that calls for state involvement rest on two arguments: the considerable investment that most states make in their systems of higher education and the demonstrable connection between the effectiveness of such systems and the fulfillment of other state objectives such as economic development.

A 1985 College Board Study (Goerty and Johnson) showed that indeed the states are involved in what are perceived as qualitative initiatives: at that point in time 24 states had set minimum admission requirements for freshmen at all of their public institutions and a number of other states were in the process of considering such actions.

Next in the order of magnitude, clearly expanding, and closer to the quantitative mode traditionally associated with assessment, have been state-mandated achievement tests. By way of illustration, at the entry

level the New Jersey Board of Higher Education has developed a College Basic Skills Placement Test Program that covers reading, writing and mathematics and is administered to all students entering New Jersey public colleges and universities as well as 11 private institutions in the state. At the lower division matriculation level is Florida's College Level Academic Skills Test (CLAST), which requires that all students in public institutions attain a specified score as a condition for either receipt of an associate degree or enrollment in upper-division courses. The test is also required of any student in a private institution who receives state financial aid. In addition to the state-level minimum competency examination, Florida has established specific curricula standards that require all students to complete 12 semester hours of English, including 6000 words in writing in each course and six semester hours of mathematics. The state of Georgia also requires a state-wide "rising junior exam" and similar tests to determine readiness for upper division work are under consideration in a number of other states. Finally, some states have required examinations for particular fields of study, most notably teacher education. Mississippi, for example, has set a minimum score requirement on the ACT/COMP exam for those interested in entering teacher education, and a number of states have analogous standards for the SAT. As far as graduation tests are concerned, few states have taken action in this area, a notable exception being Georgia, which for some 13 years has required students to pass a Regents' Exam in order to receive a degree.

Other state-level initiatives are in process. The Maryland State Board of Education conducts a comprehensive student follow-up study, and a number of states, including Rhode Island, have mandated a strengthened program review process at the institutional level. Some states have also revised their funding formulas to reward colleges that demonstrate gains in student learning. Illustrative of this latter approach is Tennessee's Performance Funding Program. Finally, a number of states such as Virginia and Connecticut have established competitive grant programs aimed at improving instruction.

In a recent ECS survey of state initiatives designed to improve the quality of undergraduate education, Kozloff (1985) found that states had either taken or were contemplating action in 12 basic areas. The seven most prevalent categories of activity, each engaged in by at least 10 states, were improved articulation between the elementary-secondary and postsecondary levels, the establishment of policies to govern cyclical program reviews, incentive funding, revision of teacher education curricula, increased admission standards, assessment of student performance—

most typically in relationship to basic skills—and development and strengthening of the general education core.

A review of selected state plans makes it clear that while virtually every state is involved in some type of "quality improvement" activity, the nature of state involvement varies greatly, ranging from rather low-key decentralized programs that rely largely on incentives to stimulate institutional action to comprehensive and highly prescriptive regulatory programs, with all kinds of intermediate variations. This leads quite naturally to the question of the appropriate role for the state.

What Should the Role of the State Be? It is the position of Ewell in the paper cited above that, in pursuit of quality, the role of the state must be as strong a one as it has been in elementary-secondary education. But Ewell then goes on to make an important distinction. He notes that higher education is different both in terms of the problems it faces and its governance structure. Ewell sees no lack of basic talent in college classrooms, nor does he see colleges and universities dealing for the most part, despite some problems of remediation, with highly deficient student populations. While data from statewide basic skills tests would suggest that Ewell is overly complacent about the skills of college students, his second point is more persuasive. He argues that, historically, colleges and universities have been decentralized and largely self-governing enterprises founded on principles of individual faculty authority and academic freedom. Thus, he maintains, colleges and universities have considerable capacity for self-improvement and indeed that if such an improvement is to last, it must come from within. This he sees as presenting a paradox to external authority and, in particular, to the question of the state's role in assessment. More specifically he says:

> On the one hand, if higher education is left entirely to itself, it is likely to neglect socially important tasks. On the other hand, if state regulatory authority is applied directly, the very mechanism for effectively achieving these socially important tasks may be threatened (1985).

Ewell concludes, and I would agree, that unlike the situation in elementary and secondary education, the state role in improving the quality of higher education, while significant and essential, must at the same time and for the most part be relatively indirect and circumscribed. The key is "to develop policy mechanisms which trigger institution-level efforts towards self-improvement."

One notable exception to the indirect approach recommended by Ewell is at the system level, where the objectives for higher education must be broader than the sum total of individual institutional objectives. The system must be concerned, for example, with questions of access at all levels, with the availability of different types of institutions, with the efficiency of programmatic distribution, with transferability, and with applied research, which serves statewide economic development needs and which is likely to go beyond the capacity of any single institution. Thus, Ewell would see the state as having the primary responsibility for defining the specific terms of systemic effectiveness. For Ewell such a perspective is important to ensure that the drive to quality does not induce institutions automatically to become more like one another and thereby fail to serve the differentiated objectives that must exist at the state level.

Ewell's approach is reinforced and extended by Harvard's president, Derek Bok. In an address given at the centennial celebration of the New England Regional Accreditation Association, Bok (1985) pointed out that one of the distinguishing features of American higher education is its remarkable freedom from government control. Typical characteristics, which, as Bok notes, are familiar to the point of seeming too obvious to mention, are the appointment of new professors without government review—even in public institutions, selection of students, determination of curricula, and considerable discretion if not complete freedom in the allocation of funds. This tradition of freedom and autonomy is very different from the pattern of continental Western Europe where, for example, admission is usually guaranteed on passing of a state, as distinguished from an institutional, examination, where, while institutions recommend faculty appointments, the state ultimately determines who will fill academic posts, where there is little discretion in the allocation of funds, and where, in general, only in matters of curriculum and course content do institutions have freedom analogous to that of institutions in the United States. It is Bok's conclusion that our decentralized and largely competitive system makes our universities more venturesome, more variegated, and more adaptable to changing needs, all characteristics extremely important in a period in which the United States is concerned about its international competitive position.

While Bok concludes that competition has served well the qualitative interests of society in higher education, he is not complacent. He sees competition resulting in quality in a number of areas, such as sports, where effectiveness can be measured, but he does not see the same process at

work in determining the quality of academic programs. Neither does he see outside pressure as consistently effective. One of the most interesting and valuable insights in the analysis to which these observations lead him comes from his examination of the impact of the Flexner report. That report issued in 1910 resulted in a major reform in medical education. However, there were significant portions of the report that had virtually no influence, sections concerned with studying the psychological and social dimensions of illness, for example. The factor which in Bok's view distinguished the influential portion of the Flexner report from those portions which were without influence was that the former conformed to values widely held within the faculties of the better schools while the latter did not. Bok thus provides historical evidence in support of Ewell's point on faculty involvement and consensus as a necessary condition of reform.

As far as the effectiveness of external funding in pursuit of quality is concerned, Bok notes that such funding has served as a catalyst in higher education, but generally in the area of research. When it moves into the area of quality of instruction, he is less optimistic about its impact. This funding can serve as a stimulus, but once again it is the conclusion of the twenty-fifth President of Harvard that serious reform will only emerge "through the combined efforts of a determined administration and a willing faculty."

These analyses of Ewell and Bok suggest a number of principles that should guide state action. First of all, because of its investment, because of the existence of state objectives beyond institutional ones, and because of the responsibility which the state has to be accountable to the public, there is an important role for the state in quality improvement and in assessment. However, it is not a monolithic role. There is as much variation in higher education between states as there is within states, so that the notion of a single model of state involvement is simplistic. While there are broad commonalities, the number and range of institutions, the pattern of state governance and coordination, the resource investment, the mechanisms of assessment already in place at the institutional and state levels, and the desired outcomes vary from state to state. The nature of state involvement should be driven by these widely variant factors and therefore there are and must continue to be a variety of assessment models. These models must preserve the variety and richness that characterizes different systems (as well as institutions) of higher education, and they will do so only to the extent that they are custom-tailored to the needs of a particular state. The New Jersey assessment model is, for

example, quite different from the Virginia model, and the rationale for each is persuasive. If the price of quality assessment is homogenization at either the system or institutional level, then it is likely to diminish rather than enhance quality.

Secondly, while the state's involvement in system-level assessment should be direct and prescriptive, the state's involvement in institutional assessment should be relatively indirect: the state should define the general categories and, in some instances, the parameters of assessment and should ensure through an appropriate monitoring process that assessment takes place, but it should leave most, if not all, of the particulars of assessment to individual institutions. I say "most, if not all," because in some instances, particularly at the entry level, particularly in relationship to basic skills, and providing there is allowance in the standards set for legitimate differences in institutional selectivity, development of state-level standardized tests may well make sense in terms of both efficiency and effectiveness. On the other side of the argument is the potential leveling influence of state-mandated tests, particularly if they go beyond basic skills, and the strong possibility that such tests will stifle what might be more diverse and more appropriate institutional assessments.

The principle of indirect state involvement suggests a number of corollaries. The state should use incentive funds as the primary mechanism for encouraging institutional administrators and faculties to develop effective assessment programs. In developing standards for the distribution of incentive funds, emphasis should be placed, first of all, on faculty involvement and secondly, in recognition of the diversity and complexity of the undergraduate experience and the concomitant necessity for complex assessment strategies, on the use of multiple methods of institutional assessment. One of the concerns frequently expressed about the current assessment movement is the tendency to look for a single measure of quality analogous to a simple-minded reliance on a single SAT score as a measure of the comparative quality of a state's elementary and secondary schools. A second concern is that assessment in higher education will be limited to basic skills. Undoubtedly these are easier to measure than are higher-order skills and knowledge. But to fail to measure the latter would be to ignore the central purposes of higher education. Valid and reliable assessment measures will be as diverse and as wide-ranging as are the programs and institutions under review. They will recognize that assessment is more than testing, that it must go beyond the measurement of minimum competencies, and that, while it will certainly rely on data, it will rely equally on informed professional judgements. Most

importantly, since effective assessment is not an end in itself but rather a means to reform, state incentive programs should encourage institutions to develop assessment programs that are largely formative and that therefore include mechanisms such as faculty development for translating assessment information into improved practices.

Finally, there is a point made by Bok that is central to the assessment drive if it is to result in quality improvement, and that is our limited technical capacity to recognize quality and to compare the effectiveness of alternative programs. Bok sees this as requiring a major research effort on the part of our universities directed toward developing better ways of measuring the impact of undergraduate education and assessing the various methods of instruction. In other words, the state of the art is relatively primitive, and resources from the state as well as the federal government and private foundations must be invested and the research capacity of our institutions engaged in developing our presently limited repertoire of effective methods of college level assessment.

I would add just one footnote to Bok's point and that is that, while the state of the art is relatively primitive, a lot more quantitative and qualitative data is available than is used effectively. Thus, while research is needed, existing data is extensive and to the extent it can be incorporated in a sound assessment package, it should be used. In many instances, what is needed is not so much the generation of new data as the extension and translation of existing data into useful information.

The Role of the State in Two National Reports. The thrust of the ECS report (1986) to which I have already referred is consistent with the Bok and Ewell positions and with the principles suggested: it explicitly recognizes the growing evidence of critical connections between the quality of higher education and regional economic development; it recognizes the importance of meeting the needs of an increasingly diverse student population; it emphasizes the assessment of both student and institutional performance; and most relevant to the topic before us, it sees the state as having major responsibility for meeting these challenges while simultaneously recognizing the primacy of the institutional component.

The ECS report defines eight challenges, which are then translated into 22 recommendations. The organization and statement of these recommendations clearly recognizes both the responsibility of the state to develop a comprehensive state strategy for educational excellence and the general principle of subsidiarity. It sees the role of the state as mover and shaker and the role of the institution as designer and doer. It thus

suggests that while most of the action to enhance quality must be conceptualized and carried out at the institutional level, over and above the institutional responsibility is the responsibility of the state to stimulate that action, to ensure that it takes place, and to add to it assessment directed toward broader state responsibilities across the entire system. Finally, the ECS report urges states and institutions in evaluating undergraduate education not to stop at assessment but rather to recognize that its purpose is to improve teaching and learning. The report concludes that the ultimate "test" is the extent to which the results of assessment are incorporated into an institution's strategy to improve teaching and learning and a state's strategy to improve its system of higher education.

In the recent report of the nation's governors entitled "Time for Results: Governors' 1991 Report on Education" (1986), significant state action is also called for, but again in terms consistent with the Ewell and Bok postures. Specifically, governors, state legislatures, state coordinating boards, and institutional governing bodies are asked to ensure the existence of a clear definition of the role and mission of each public higher education institution in their states. These same bodies are asked to give high priority to undergraduate instruction in all of their institutions and most particularly in universities that normally give high priority to research and graduate instruction. Further, each college and university is asked to implement systematic programs that use multiple measures to assess undergraduate learning, while states are urged to provide incentives for the development and institutionalization of such programs.

A Modest Beginning. In Rhode Island we have tried to adhere to the principles suggested. In the context of a "Master Plan for Quality," the Board of Governors has developed policy mechanisms that are designed to stimulate institution-level efforts toward self-improvement. The principle of subsidiarity has been applied.

More specifically, in consultation with the institutions of higher education, two general courses of action are being pursued: all programs are on a cyclical schedule of either institutional level review or national program accreditation, and assessments from these reviews will be shared annually with a subcommittee of the Board of Governors, and a set of "indicators of quality" has been defined in generic terms. These range from admissions standards and retention and completion rates to value-added measures and placement data. As a set, they include both qualitative and quantitative as well as input and output variables. Each institution must report to the Board every three years on the defined indicators of quality

as these indicators fit the particular institution. The report on trends in admission standards coming from Rhode Island's research university would thus be quite different in content and focus from an analogous report from its open access community college. The basic approach is to use existing data wherever possible but to reorganize that data so that it becomes a part of a comprehensive assessment package.

As a stimulus to further institutional action, the Rhode Island Board of Governors has proposed to the Governor and the Legislature, in the context of its FY '88 budget request, financial support for an "Incentive Fund for Excellence" which, if approved, would be used to finance programs designed to improve quality at the undergraduate level.

In Summary. The traditional role of the state in higher education assessment has been minimal. That role is clearly expanding as both the interest of the state and its investment in higher education expands. The current patterns of state involvement vary widely from indirect incentive programs to direct regulatory action. While the state has primary and direct responsibility for the assessment of the system of higher education, the task of institutional assessment and resultant reform must be required but also stimulated and rewarded by the state and designed and carried out by the faculty and administration of each institution. As a result, patterns of institutional assessment will vary, as do existing patterns of state assessment. However, in both instances there should be significant formative as well as summative elements. Finally, the state should also recognize that an essential resource in improving the quality of assessment is the research capacity of its institutions of higher education and it should therefore engage in direct funding of research on assessment.

The ultimate principle underlying the assessment drive should be that whatever the pattern of state assessment, it must preserve and enhance the richness and variety of American higher education. This suggests that if the hand of the state is to be iron, the glove must indeed be velvet or, returning to Chaucer, while the state that naught assaieth, naught achieveth, the state that assaieth alone or over-assaieth, under-achieveth.

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